



39 of 120 DOCUMENTS

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BODY:

The rich wood casket had been closed, and the Maryland flag draped precisely over it, when the preacher cast a disbelieving eye over the crowd gathered yesterday for the funeral of state Del. Howard Peters Rawlings.

"I don't know if I've ever seen so many politicians in one place," said the Rev. Raphael G. Warnock, senior pastor of Douglas Memorial Community Church. "If we convened after this service, we might get things done. We could end gridlock."

But without the bang of a gavel or a roll call vote, much got done inside the West Baltimore sanctuary yesterday.

A city reflected on the remarkable life of one of its most influential leaders. A mayor, senators and delegates pledged to emulate his commitment to schools and housing. And a family grieved over the loss of a husband, father and cousin they affectionately called "Petey," a man who presided over living-room debates with the same gravitas he exhibited on the floor of the House of Delegates.

"Who was Pete Rawlings?" asked the Rev. Bruce F. Haskins, pastor of Queens Chapel United Methodist Church and Rawlings' nephew. "It's a big question, with a big answer."

Rawlings died a week ago from cancer at age 66. Raised in public housing, he was trained as a mathematician and championed social issues before his election to the House of Delegates in 1979.

For more than a decade, he served as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, a post that afforded him tremendous control over state spending.

An unflinching advocate for unpopular causes, Rawlings angered many as he demanded accountability from

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historically black colleges and poorly performing school districts. He bucked black ministers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People with his call in 1997 to reform city schools, trading control for state aid.

Those who encountered Rawlings - experiencing the warm, self-effacing persona of "Pete" or the withering criticism of his hard-edged alter-ego, "Howard" - had nothing but praise for him yesterday.

"Pete was a public official almost totally oblivious to public opinion," former House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr., a close ally, said from the pulpit. "When Pete wanted a poll, he looked in the mirror."

Rawlings' repeated demands for a state budget that was both "fiscally prudent and socially responsible" became a State House cliché that was no laughing matter.

Scores of politicians, along with family, friends, lobbyists, business leaders and state bureaucrats - 1,200 in all - descended on the church for a mix of politically tinged speeches and spirituality.

"For all our busy lives, our busy schedules and our busy itineraries, Pete decided to call a meeting and we all showed up to say 'present and accounted for,'" said NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, along with Rawlings a protégé of former Sen. Verda F. Welcome, the nation's first black female state senator.

Rawlings was a college math teacher who had completed most of his work toward a doctorate, but "it would be the inexact science of people and politics in which Pete would earn his Ph.D.," Mfume said.

"Once a teacher, always a teacher, and he taught us all," Mfume said. "He taught us how to hope and how to smile, how to laugh and how to cry. ... Pete was a foe without hate, a friend without treachery."

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele and Comptroller William Donald Schaefer attended the service, as did Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan and scores of legislators. When a pastor asked for all elected officials to stand, much of the church's main level rose. Crowds filled the balcony and overflow rooms in the basement.

"There are not that many giants left in this day and age. He was a giant," Ehrlich said. "You wanted him on your side. When he was against you, he was a tough opponent."

Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley said Rawlings seemed to follow Fredrick Douglass' historic exhortation to "agitate ... agitate ... agitate" in the fight for justice.

"There was no fiercer advocate for Baltimore children, Maryland children and our own future," O'Malley said. "Some see power as an end to itself. But Pete saw power as a means by which he could help others. And did he ever."

Rawlings endorsed O'Malley for mayor in 1999. It was a decision prompted by Rawlings' daughter, City Councilwoman Stephanie Rawlings Blake, and one that boosted O'Malley's credibility as a white candidate in a predominantly black city.

Yesterday's ceremony was also for longtime friends - people who remembered him from Frederick Douglass High School, the Edgar Allan Poe Homes and his formative years in politics. Many waited in a block-long line in the hours before the service to pass by an open casket, where Rawlings' body lay in a dark suit with a red dove pin on his lapel.

Dorothy Clark of Ashburton said she went to elementary school with Rawlings and grew up with him in the Poe homes.

"I knew he was going to be great because he was always ambitious," said Clark, a teacher for 39 years.

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Sonia Stockton, who took Rawlings' math class many years ago at Morgan State University, called him an excellent teacher. Stockton, who later became Rawlings' campaign treasurer and legislative assistant, said he was a good boss as well.

"He gave us a very serious facade, but he could be very funny. He could be a little tease," she said.

Delivering a final "message of hope," Haskins, the nephew, said Rawlings did not belong to the city, the state or even his family. "Petey knew he belonged to Christ," Haskins said.

Before the casket was wheeled outside for burial at Woodlawn Cemetery, the Morgan State University Choir launched a final selection that soared to the arches of the church.

"Glory, glory, hallelujah," sang soloist Sherry Hunt, belting out familiar lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," capturing the sentiments of everyone who spoke before her. "His truth is marching on."

Sun staff writer Ivan Penn contributed to this article.

GRAPHIC: Photo(s), After ending his speech, NAACP President Kweisi Mfume touches the casket of his longtime friend, Del. Howard P. Rawlings. About 1,200 mourners attended the funeral, including many politicians.; LLOYD FOX : SUN STAFF

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